

## TRICKING TIME

**Dust.** Robert Ashley. Quartier d'été Festival.

Paris, France. July 26–28, 2001.

Paris was hot and stormy. While Parisians and tourists prepared to celebrate the arrival of this year's Tour de France through the city's arches, the quiet courtyards of the Palais Royal provided a special ambience for cultural summer festival. The Quartier d'été offered a musical kaleidoscope of contemporary state-of-the-art performances from around the world. *Dust*, an opera by American composer Robert Ashley and Japanese designer Yukihiro Yoshihara, was scheduled for three consecutive nights in late July. The opera has enjoyed only a handful of complete productions since its 1998 premiere in Yokohama, Japan, so this was a special occasion.

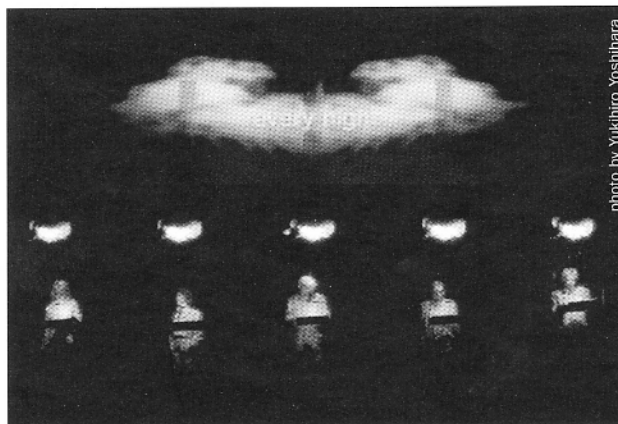


photo by Yukihiro Yoshihara

Stage Performance of *Dust*

Upon entering the Cour d'Orléans of the Palais Royal, the audience received the complete libretto in French translation. Only in the first part of the performance was the text to be projected. The language, however, was important, for the musical drama of Ashley's operas originates in his native tongue. In many of his pieces over the last forty years, most of the sounds, and parts of the harmonic structures, are derived from spoken or sung American English. His pieces favour—in fact require—a way of singing less concerned with melody than with fitting certain amounts of syllables into certain meters. Inappropriately, some Eurocentric reviewers still call it recitativo. Unaccustomed ears often hear some kind of speaking over simple harmonies, already missing the complexity that's there right at the surface. In fact, Ashley's pieces do not offer instant gratification. They are conceived for repeated attendance, not only for repeated listening, but also for repeated viewing, as "operas for television." In accordance with this approach, the contents of the libretti (usually written by Ashley himself) are delivered too rapidly for immediate comprehension. The

French libretto, then, was a treat, something to enjoy at home after the show.

The performance began with five singers entering the stage, dressed in matching, loose-fitting suits designed by Jacqueline Humbert. Each took up a position behind a tall rectangular glass panel and remained there for the whole performance. The panels—sometimes opaque, sometimes transparent—gave the stage a low-key but high-tech appearance. A TV monitor above each singer served to connect the five vertical "booths," and a large horizontal screen spanned the space above them. The screen could be split into as many as thirty-two individual segments about the size of 24-inch TV screens. Yoshihara's digitally projected images seemed to take snippets of the text as starting points for abstractions in shapes and colours,

and also incorporated (mostly American) TV imagery [see photo]. It would take a whole essay to describe the visual complexity and its various correspondences to the text, from simple colour changes to the relationship between the images on the big screen and those on the five TV monitors. Both the visual orchestration and a prerecorded tape (prepared by Ashley, "Blue" Gene Tyranny, and Tom Hamilton) were electronically triggered by a timer code related to the score.

The libretto of *Dust* has 1,997 lines (Ashley completed the piece in 1998). The score places the libretto in a temporal and harmonic framework by giving each line four beats (at ninety per minute) and by assigning chords in specific voicings. Such a framework leaves basically indeterminate the actual orchestration, as well as timing, inflections, and pitches of the vocal delivery. Ashley established this kind of notation in the mid-eighties, when he was already working with more or less the same ensemble, on his opera tetralogy *Now Eleanor's Idea*.

In *Dust*, all musicians performed with both score and tape. The five singers heard the tape through their monitor speakers in a special mix that emphasized the first beats of each line for better metric orientation. Tyranny, who played a sixth voice on a synthesizer keyboard, sat next to Hamilton's audio mixing console, in sight of the timer code and facing the stage.

Like all of Ashley's work, *Dust* is a cornucopia of ideas. The opera is one of *The Immortality Songs*, Ashley's latest set of pieces for vocal ensemble, associated with the vocal practice of ranting. Not that Ashley transcribed the words of a rant or tried to make the pieces

sound like ranting, but related his series to the rant process this way: "In let[ting] something out that can't be kept in," and that "doesn't need or expect an audience," we make a "claim to immortality." Hence the title. *The Immortality Songs* are also based on the number seven. When finished, there will be forty-nine of them, of various lengths—seven subsets of seven pieces each with seven-syllable titles. *Dust's* full title reads *Dust (The End of Time Project)*. More on the title later.

*Dust* is a highly structured sequence of eleven harmonically and textually interrelated songs, tailored to Ashley's ensemble. Ashley himself takes on the principal voice of the first song, which introduces the characters, the complete harmonic material, and the central musical strategy of the opera. Not surprisingly, there are seven characters in all. They are potentially good rangers, street people in an unnamed city, "on the fringes of society" and without an audience (though Ashley modelled some of them after real homeless people in his New York City neighbourhood). They include "Green Pants" (Sam Ashley), "Lucille" (Joan La Barbara), "The Rug" (Thomas Buckner), "Shirley Temple" (Humbert), and "some old crazy guy who thinks about art" (Ashley). It's hard to follow the chord changes in the first song. Hamilton's aural effects hide the pulse of the beat and make the song sound rhythmically freer. Yet there is a pattern: the changes occur according to the first four numbers of a Fibonacci row, making the density of harmonic information pulsate. *Dust's* central concern, finally, is to make "friends" with time, to temporally overcome time's painful irreversibility by employing "shortness," durations that are only a few seconds long. Such a strategy goes far beyond any specific performance of the opera. Rather, it deals with time as we know it (and ignore it)—its successiveness, its linearity, and its limitedness—and aims at a potentially better way of dealing with life, of having a better time, so to speak.

The next four songs feature the other four singers. The principal voice alternates between female and male, while three back-up singers change from song to song. Amazingly, Ashley sings throughout. With typical Ashley wit and hilarity, these semi-autobiographical songs tell American stories of sex and violence—rather than European ones of love and death. The songs differ in their harmonic changes and structures, but they form a block of four in that they all recount memories of one central character of *Dust*. This character, however, remains unseen. In fact, at no time in the opera do we even hear his voice. But with the voices of the other singer-characters, the opera takes us inside his mind and makes him audible. We hear him through others. He is the void around which *Dust* swirls.

His physical condition reflects his special status: he "lost a couple of legs in some war." Though physically absent, he literally embodies time's irreversibility. Sharing his memories, he reflects on chances that don't come again, on near successes, and on failures. In formal terms, the last sentence of these four songs ("I fucked up") arrives, ironically, at the proportional golden mean of the opera.

At this point, the character sung by Ashley returns, like a master of ceremonies, for a reprise of the introductory song. He announces "something special": a "long song" that will strive for more than just absence of pain and that will nudge *Dust* onto a spiritual plane. Extending the established temporal strategy of the opera, the intention in this long song will not only to make friends with time but to enter some "other kind of time." The song will deal with recalling a temporal experience that seemed to transcend time, and will be about suspending time without stopping it. An attempt to recapture "a conversation with God" that nevertheless required the help of another person, the song will also be about "a moment of love between two people," for instance, in the form of a simple human gesture.

The performance of the song may actually make such a gesture. Ashley sings the principal voice himself but the other singer-characters aid him in achieving "a perfect imitation" of the central character's "top act." They recount "his experience of losing his legs ... under the influence of the morphine he was given to ease his pain" in a hospital. The long song encompasses elements of daydream, drug trip, mystic vision, and near-death experience, all in one. And the song is an ear-opener. As it turns out, Ashley used the words of this song earlier to harmonize each of the memory songs. The memory songs contain the protagonist's past, but also a future part of the opera. (It is in fact this intertextualization that makes all four memory songs equally long and, retroactively, equally important.) And, as the long song was buried under the lyrics of the memory songs, so are the harmonies of the memory songs inside the story of the long song—permutating and highly compressed (changing every other beat), making the long song actually shorter than each memory song. More powerful, however, is the long song's vocal arrangement. Like bits of thoughts that constantly appear, consecutively or simultaneously, the five voices create a music of the protagonist's mind that fulfills the promise of the introductory song and realizes the opera's temporal strategy of shortness—to "take a bunch of short ideas and arrange them so that they overlap." The overlapping creates a breath-taking simulation of speed, and in the live performance it achieves what the song describes. Like the protagonist, we can't quite understand what we hear. The words go by too fast to be dis-

cernible. Whole sentences ("There is an end") sound like single words ("eresane"—"the 'secret word' that would stop all wars and suffering"). That the protagonist "didn't get the end" is no longer a matter of failure or success. The end of time, as it appears in *Dust's* full title, remains a project. The long song is a "story about the almost" on a spiritual level, and the same can be said about Ashley's opera as a whole.

After the life-changing events of the long song, the inside world of the protagonist's mind seems to give way to the audible music of the outside world. What remains are "the songs from the radio" that the protagonist hears (or remembers hearing) in the hospital. Each of the four radio songs recycles the harmonic material of the memory song sung earlier by the same principal singer. Or is it the other way around? We can at least perceive that the long song links the memory songs and the radio songs. The long song is the climax and centre of the opera, it is *Dust* in a nutshell. Both the long song and the whole opera consist of short episodes of aural and visual information that overlap rapidly and without a single break. Vice versa, the opera as a whole then appears to be the events of the long song unfolded into performance time—like the simultaneities of a thought, laid out in real time, and adding up to, surprisingly, almost ninety minutes.

As with the memory songs at the opening of the opera, each remaining principal singer gets one radio song at the end. Again, the principal parts alternate between female and male voices, though the order is new. The radio songs, however, combine the musical style of '50s popular music with references to country music. The popular medium gives Ashley the opportunity to simplify the harmonic changes, to emphasize the meter, and to connect the wish for another suspension of time with romantic longing. In the radio songs, with violence now absent, the hope prevails that love can help. In particular, the last two songs seem to revisit that crucial moment of a simple loving human gesture. The opera closes with another suspension of time, even of musical time (through repetitions à la Morton Feldman, with gradually increasing silences that cross the strict four-beat scheme of the lines, thus breaking the beat). This ending caused mixed reactions. For some audience members, it was apparently too ambiguous, possibly even a surrender to pop music. Others left whistling the tunes of "the songs from the radio" that they had just heard.

I attended two of the three Paris performances and was fascinated by their differences. Ashley and Tyranny seemed to take the most liberties with their parts. On the second of the three nights, Ashley opened with a British sounding twang in the introductory song (this might have been a spontaneous reaction to thunderstorms that threatened to keep the visuals from being

projected—a threat that had become reality the night before). The third night's performance felt the most relaxed. Not even breezes tossing around Tyranny's sheet music were able to ruffle him. His part seemed restrained but should not be underestimated. Delivered in constantly changing sounds and styles, it was essential to helping the piece breathe. I was impressed by the precision with which the five singers switched back and forth between principal voice and chorus parts throughout, in terms of rhythm and pitch, between free and notated parts. And thanks to Hamilton, who was in charge of the overall sound, the Paris performances outshined last year's CD recording of *Dust* on Lovely Music (LCD 1006). Some nice snapshots of the pre-performance atmosphere in Paris are posted on the Lovely Music Web site at <[www.lovely.com/technical/technical-photos-PQE.html](http://www.lovely.com/technical/technical-photos-PQE.html)>.

*Dust* may well be the saddest feel-good opera yet composed. At the end of the long song there is a very poignant moment when Ashley's character asks repeatedly, "Any of you guys'd wanna back me?" The other singers suddenly become conspicuously silent. It is the bitterest moment of the piece. In his home country—which, after all, is also the home country of television—Ashley has not been able to find sufficient backing to have his operas (like *Dust*) realized in the television format for which they were composed. If it hadn't been for Dorothea Tanning, who co-commissioned the piece, and Mimi Johnson, who co-produced it, *Dust* might never have been written. And without Bénédicte Pesle, who was largely responsible for inviting the production to Paris, the opera might never have been performed there. Where would Ashley be, where would American music be, without the backing of these women?

—Ralf Dietrich

## MUSICWORKS

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